

(Re) Writing Lila: Literacy Narratives of Reform from the New York State Training School for Girls, 1920-1970
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Abstract



This study examined how textual fragments drawn from institutional and personal documents construct competing representations of girls incarcerated at the NYS Training School for Girls in Hudson, NY during the 1920s. Drawing upon a small private archive highlighting eighteen girls and a broader set of materials available through the New York State Archives, we have catalogued news reports, medical intake forms, inter-agency communications and personal letters. Our exploration has revealed rich details about

the relationship of the girls to the state institutions responsible for social welfare and draws attention to the tensions between institutional representations of the girls and their own self-representations.

Summary

We used feminist and discursive lenses to investigate visual and linguistic representations of female deviance and key questions of historical and contemporary attitudes towards justice in the United States during Progressive Era. In addition to collecting over 1000 archival documents, a key component of this investigation was working with the Prison Public Memory Project, a Hudson-based organization, to make archival materials available for dissemination and discussion within the population of Hudson, NY. We delivered public talks and designed and presented a series of interactive pop-up museums that engaged local participants in contributing and reflecting upon memories and materials related to the school and its history.



Recommendations for Future Studies

This study suggests that we need to further research the genealogy of prison literacy practices in order to inform the pedagogical and public interventions we design to interrupt the contemporary school-to-prison pipeline and imagine alternatives for the thousands of youth in confinement today. The NYS Training School was one of many such schools for boys and girls in the United States; additional work on these institutions can illuminate the historical basis for contemporary literacy practices of incarcerated writers. This study can be foundational to work on personal and institutional narratives of incarcerated writers that offer alternative stories of literacy and education.